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## "WHAT'S IN A NAME?" "THE PLAY'S THE THING"

By SAMUEL M. WAXMAN

IT IS not unfitting that these words of Shakespeare should be used as the title of a study of Benavente's *La Malquerida*, which is now being played to American audiences under the title, *The Passion Flower*,<sup>1</sup> for the Spanish dramatist regards the English master with veneration. Let us not exaggerate by calling Benavente the Spanish Shakespeare as some of our fellow citizens have done. It is extremely hazardous to anticipate the judgment of posterity; even those gods of criticism, Horace and Boileau, nodded at times. Let the critics of the future assign to Benavente his true place. Consider for a moment the havoc we have wrought with Blasco Ibáñez. We have made of him so consummate a best-seller that we shall probably never see fulfilled the promises of *Cuentos Valencianos* and *La Barraca*.

The waters have been flowing under Harvard Bridge for fifteen years since we in Boston have seen a Spanish play on the professional stage. Even then *El Gran Galeoto* was so mangled in Mr. Faversham's single performance that we could scarcely recognize the play of Echegaray. There are two factors, both foreign to the intrinsic merits of Benavente's work, that are contributing to its success in this country: the name and fame of Nance O'Neil, and the title of the translation, *The Passion Flower*. It is true that the Spanish title *La Malquerida* almost defies translation; but what defense is there for *Passion Flower*? Zerolo defines the verb *malquerer* "tener mala voluntad a una persona o cosa," which would make the past participle *malquerida* equivalent to the English "the hated one." Benavente obviously does not use the word in that sense. Acacia, *la malquerida*, is the sinfully beloved or the ill-beloved of her stepfather, Esteban. For a long time I was puzzled over the English *Passion Flower*, which to me connoted something entirely different from what the producers meant that it should connote to this cinematized twentieth century world. According to the Oxford Dictionary the passion

<sup>1</sup> Plays by Jacinto Benavente translated by John Garrett Underhill, Charles Scribner's Sons, N. Y., 1917.

flower is "the name of plants of the genus *passiflora*, so called because the parts of the flower were fancifully thought to resemble the instruments of Christ's passion or suggest its attendant circumstances." Here was a curious situation. The Spanish dictionary gave no authority for the obvious meaning of Benavente's title, and the English dictionary failed to help me with the translation. Finally I discovered the reason for passion flower; it was a mere exigency of rhyme on the part of the translator! But contrary to the old saw he had both rhyme and reason for "passion flower." It rhymes very reasonably with "evil hour." Having invented "evil hour," he proceeded to invent "passion flower," whence comes the title to the play. But before matters get too complicated, I must briefly outline the plot.

From childhood Acacia has persistently refused to accept her mother's second husband Esteban as her stepfather. She resents his sharing her love for her mother, Raimunda. To Acacia he is always "that man." Seeking in vain to win her filial love, Esteban gradually conceives for her a sinful passion which tortures him in spite of his attempts to conquer it. One suitor, Norberto, is frightened away; a second, Faustino, is murdered on the eve of his marriage with Acacia. Suspicion is at first fastened on Norberto, but Esteban's guilt is soon discovered, and he confesses to Raimunda both crime and motive. Acacia, however, insists that she is innocent in word and deed, and reiterates her hatred for "that man." The broken-hearted mother will forgive Esteban and fight for his life. Acacia must go to a convent for a while. But first she must kiss her father as a dutiful daughter. In their passionate embrace the terrible truth is revealed; Acacia's hatred for the father is really love for the man. Esteban, intoxicated with love, loses his head and attempts to flee with Acacia, but Raimunda violently calls upon the world to avenge her and bars his passage. He fires a shot; Raimunda falls mortally wounded. But she does not die in vain. Acacia rushes to her mother's side and receives her last words, "That man can no longer harm thee. Thou art safe. Blessed be this blood of mine that brings thee salvation even as the blood of our Lord."

It is Norberto who in exculpating himself sings to Raimunda the foul *copla* that the gossips of the neighborhood are repeating,

the *copla* from which the title is taken, both in the Spanish and English versions.

El que quiere a la del Soto,  
 tié pena de la vida.  
 Por quererla quien la quiere  
 le dicen la Malquerida.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Underhill translates:

Who loves the maid that dwells by the Mill  
 Shall love in an evil hour;  
 Because she loves with the love that she loves,  
 Call her the Passion Flower.<sup>3</sup>

We can excuse "Mill" for "Soto," but we cannot allow to go unchallenged "Passion Flower" for "Malquerida." It is evident that Mr. Underhill would make of Acacia a siren who lures on to sin her stepfather. "Passion Flower" is not only a distortion of "Malquerida," it is the exact opposite of what Benavente desires to bring out in his characterization of Acacia. It is her very hatred and jealousy that give rise to Esteban's sinful love. If love there is in Acacia's heart, it is subconscious and negative. Furthermore the line

Because she loves with the love that she loves

is a misrepresentation of the author's thought. He actually says "because she is loved by the man who loves her she is called the sinfully beloved." In the original, the active love is on the part of Esteban; Acacia is passive. The translation makes an anti-climax. Benavente has subtly prepared us for Acacia's avowal, but it does not come until the last scene of the last act. Benavente's psychological art is therefore lost in the translation. To be sure the words "La Malquerida" follow "The Passion Flower" when the expression is used later, but if to a Spaniard "La Malquerida" would be difficult to define, what would an English speaking person be expected to make out of it? But after all, "What's in a name?"

"The play's the thing." How has the rest of the play fared in Mr. Underhill's hands? In general he has caught the spirit of the author. In no way does his work bear the earmarks of a translation. He errs, however, by making his language too literary, too

<sup>2</sup> Jacinto Benavente, Teatro, Tomo vigesimo, Madrid, Librería de los Sucesores de Hernando, 1914. Act II, sc. v.

<sup>3</sup> Act II, p. 238.

impeccably correct. He does not render faithfully the uncouth, illiterate speech of Benavente's country folk. The repetitions and asseverations are omitted; the elliptical expressions, the colorful and picturesque diminutives of the Spanish are completely lost. No attempt whatsoever is made to give the equivalent English colloquialisms for such expressions as *quieo* for *quiero* or *ecta* for *decta*. Let me give a specimen of the original side by side with the translation. El Rubio, a rough, unlettered peasant, is speaking:

Tié usted razón, y aquel día debió usted haberme matao; pero es que aquel día, es la primera vez que he tenfo miedo. Yo no esperaba que saliea libre Norberto. Usted no quiso hacer caso e mí cuando yo le ecía a usted: Hay que apretar con la justicia que declare la Acacia y diga que Norberto le tenía jurao de matar a Faustino. . . . ¿Va usted a decirme que no podía usted obligarla a que hubiea declarao. . . . y como ella, ya hubiéamos tenfo otros que hubiean declarao de haberle entendío decir lo mismo? . . . Y otra cosa hubiea sfo; veríamos si la justicia le había soltao así como así. Pues como iba diciendo, que no es que quiea negar lo malo que hice aquel día; como vi libre a Norberto y pensé que la justicia y el tfo Eusebio que había de apretar con ella, y tóos habían de echarse a buscar por otra parte, como digo, por primera vez me entró miedo y quise atolondrarme y bebí, que no tengo costumbre y me fuf de la lengua, que ya digo, aquel día me hubiea usted matao y razón tenía usted de sobra.<sup>4</sup>

You ought to have killed me. That was the first time in my life that I ever was afraid. I never expected they would let Norbert go. I told you that we ought to go into court and have Acacia testify that Norbert had sworn he was going to kill Faustino, but you wouldn't listen. Do you mean to tell me that you couldn't have made her do it? We could have got others, too, to say the same. Then it would have been easy; they would never have let him go. I know I made a fool of myself, but when I saw that Norbert was free, that the law — yes, and Tfo Eusebio — would never stop there, that they would look somewhere else, then I was afraid for the first time. I wanted to forget. So I began to drink, which I never do, and I talked. You ought to have killed me then; you had ground for it.<sup>5</sup>

To some of you this may seem carping criticism. I suppose we should be content that the American stage version is after all a translation and not a garbled adaptation of a Broadway dramatist made to conform to the tastes of American audiences. But as can readily be seen by a comparison of the Spanish text

<sup>4</sup> Edition mentioned above, pp. 251, 252.

<sup>5</sup> Edition mentioned above, p. 254.

and the English rendering, much of Benavente's subtle, delicate artistry is missing in Mr. Underhill's translation. The English version lacks the salt of the original Spanish. An ocean still divides the dramatic art of Europe from that of America.

As for the acting and setting of the American production, we should have nothing but praise, Mr. Lewisohn of the dessicated and moribund *Nation* to the contrary. In simple, direct fashion is created the illusion of a provincial household in Castile. Scenery and stage properties have an authentic Castilian flavor. Each part is well acted and the whole company shows the high standards set by Miss O'Neil. And yet if there is a weak point in the cast it is Miss O'Neil's Raimunda. From a histrionic point of view she was excellent, but she failed to give the illusion of a Spanish wife and mother. This was not because of her fair hair—Castile is not lacking in *rubias*—but in some intangible way she did not succeed in making herself a part of the milieu which scene painter and master of properties had wrought about her. Miss Westbray, who played the part of Acacia, not only acted superbly her difficult rôle; ashen pale, dark-eyed, dark-haired, she looked the morbid "malquerida." She was the real star of the performance.

*La Malquerida* is one of Benavente's best achievements, altho it is not typical of his work. But indeed is there any one dramatic genre that is typical of this many-sided genius? Eclectic in form as well as in inspiration, he has already produced nearly one hundred monologues, farces, fairy plays, *zarzuelas*, tragedies, and comedies of manners, besides translations and adaptations of Shakespeare, Molière, Ariosto, Abbé Prévost, Grimm of the fairy tales, Dumas Père, Bulwer-Lytton, Augier, and Hervieu. *La Malquerida* was first produced in Madrid in 1913 at the Teatro de la Princesa, where Maria Guerrero, to whom the author dedicated the play created the part of Raimunda. In this *drama* as Benavente calls it, there is not a single forced entrance or exit. There is not a superfluous action or word. Each scene follows the other with relentless logic, a characteristic trait of our dramatist. There is no time wasted in by-play.

Altho a sense of the tragic pervades *La Malquerida*, it does not obsess the audience. There are the commonplace scenes of everyday life where comedy is mingled with tragedy; and these scenes are solidly welded together. There is something of the

power of the ancient Greek tragedies in *La Malquerida*, fate finding its modern counterpart in the unseen but ever present spirit of the dead. "Que los muertos," says Raimunda to Esteban, "no se van de con nosotros, cuando paecen que se van pa siempre al llevarlos pa enterrar en el campo santo, que andan día y noche alrededor de los que han querío y de los que han odiao en vida. Y sin nosotros verlos, hablan con nosotros. Que de ahí proviene que muchas veces pensamos lo que no hubieamos creído de haber pensao nunca!" (Esteban) "Y tú crees?" (Raimunda) "Que too esto ha sío pa castigarnos, que el padre de mi hija no me ha perdonao que yo hubiea dao otro padre a su hija. Que hay cosas que no puen explicarse en este mundo. Que un hombre bueno como tú, puea dejar de serlo. Porque tú has sío muy bueno."<sup>6</sup> There is nothing of the modern spiritualist clap-trap in the wreaking of the dead husband's vengeance. Benavente is too great an artist for that. The dead man's hand is all the more evident by its very absence. It is in the dialog that Benavente makes his points, and of dialog he is a master. Then, too, in *La Malquerida* we feel the element of horror that is found in the Greek tragedies, the horror that purges, according to Aristotle. And if "the hatred of brothers is terrible" as Euripides says, what of the hatred between mother and daughter? How remote seems the voluptuousness and velleity of Donnay's play of like subject, *L'Autre Danger*? There is no playing with fire in *La Malquerida*. Benavente's sincerity and earnestness will not admit of the Frenchman's moral nonchalance. *La Malquerida* contains none of the salacious, suggestive immorality of our latter day problem plays and ubiquitous movies; it is most reticent and chaste. The passionate kiss of Esteban and Acacia inspires us with only horror and repulsion. If *La Malquerida* is to be censured as immoral, then we must also censure the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and of Shakespeare and Racine, too.

Acacia and Raimunda are most masterfully drawn. In these women Benavente has added two more portraits to his gallery of feminine characters. And so in spite of all our adverse criticisms, we owe a great debt to Mr. Underhill and Miss O'Neil for introducing Benavente's *Malquerida* to the American public. "What's in a name?" "The play's the thing."

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<sup>6</sup> Act III. sc. 9.